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**Commission on the Status of Women**
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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels**

## Statement submitted by World Veterans Federation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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## Statement

The World Veterans Federation (WVF) is pleased to comment on a theme of this 50th Session of the UN CSW: "***Equal participation of women and men in decision-making at all levels.***" The WVF, founded in 1950, brings together those who have experienced the sufferings of war - as combatants and civilian victims of war- who have dedicated themselves not only to improve their well-being , but to support the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For more than twenty years, WVF has been a strong voice for human rights, testifying to this Commission and other UN bodies, and working with governments and non-governmental organizations on behalf of women's equal rights, with emphasis on those impacted by armed conflicts.

It is timely and urgent that the UN CSW assess the status of the effort to bring more women into decision-making positions, what factors block that access , and why they occur. Different avenues have been taken over the years to overcome them – some have worked slowly, some have not worked at all. The challenge to the UN, to the international community and to governments is to review the current situation and to explore other strategies to achieve this goal.

**Report Card** -- Studies(see Background Papers) have shown that when quotas are mandated or voluntary for a certain percentage of seats in parliaments or legislatures to be set aside for women, there has been a very slow but steady increase in women's participation in parliaments and local governance over the years. . Thirty percent has been considered the *critical mass* when women's participation in governance becomes truly effective. Today, one quarter of the top countries with over 30% women are *post-conflict countries*. They include Rwanda, South Africa, and Mozambique, where an amazing number of women were elected to their parliaments in the first post-conflict elections. They are called *fast track countries* because in a short period of time women have become significant actors in the governance of their countries. Further study is needed to examine why and how this phenomenon came about, and whether that process can be adapted elsewhere.

On the other hand, there can be less positive developments for women wherein change in governments, from wars or massive political upheaval, occur. The experience of Moldavia( background paper) paints a bleak picture of 'unstable transition periods…where the ugliest social patterns come to the fore'. A report from that country indicates that downward economic circumstances contribute to the lack of gender equality. These situations, where the clock is turned back on women's rights, were not uncommon after vast political, economic and social upheavals, whether they took place in the breakup of the Soviet Eastern bloc, or the reshuffling of former colonial empires.

More attention needs to be paid as to how women's rights can be protected and enhanced with those societies in transition. In such cases, not only had democratic institutions been absent, but civil society may not have flourished – these must be addressed early on.

An interesting case involving a quota of decision making positions in the private sector was reported recently in the press. The government of Norway mandated that in the next two years, 40% of the Board members of the nation's large publicly traded private companies had to be women. This is highly significant if one considers that in today's global economy, the corporation (especially the multilateral) is often as powerful a political actor as the government. It was reported that this law met with an uproar from the male business community. A surprising development in view of the fact that Norway has one of the highest percentages of women parliamentarians in the world.

A major challenge is to convince men that they will benefit from the addition of women in decision making, in the public and the private sectors. Sharing power is never easy, and rarely accepted voluntarily. It is seen as a loss , rather than a gain, when positions are mandated for women, especially when it has been considered one gender's birthright. Yet other points of view, other interests and experiences , which women add, enrich the mix and can be sources of new ideas and fresh thinking. Another plus is that by bringing in 'others', there will also be a sharing responsibilities and onerous burdens. Men as well as women will benefit from broadening participation in decision-making.

**Resolution 1325** A powerful tool for effecting change in decision making came from passage by the UN Security Council of Resolution 1325 in October 2000 which reaffirmed the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and

in postwar reconstruction. By mandating the inclusion of women in peace processes, including the writing of peace treaties, and post-war reconstruction efforts, there exists the chance to create new laws and institutions quickly which promote women's equality. Wars themselves are transformational. But history tells us that reconstruction of society can go in different directions – witness the *fast track countries* which increased participation of women in governance, but also the case of societies in transition which diluted women's rights. Conflicts shake up social and cultural institutions including tribal and religious customs, so that there are opportunities to reshape the landscape. Women's presence at the peace table and in the drafting of treaties can assure that their interests are being considered .

The recent experiences of the writing of constitutions in Iraq and Afghanistan dramatize the need for women's active participation in this process; otherwise, their roles in the post-conflict society can be severely circumscribed. Implementation of Resolution 1325 can lead to new political, economic and legal configurations which empower women and ensure their human rights.. We share the conviction that "**peace agreements (are) a means for promoting gender equality and insuring participation of women.**" We urge the UN and governments to give Resolution 1325 full backing when peace processes and post war reconstruction strategies are on the table. Civil society also must use its influence to make Resolution 1325 a potent force for change. Women need to be at the drawing board as societies rebuild and reorder their institutions.

**Enabling Environment** CEDAW and other UN conventions and protocols that promote the human rights and equality of women, the major UN Conferences, strong actions of the UN agencies such as the Commission on the Status of Women, UNIFEM, and national initiatives, all contribute to fashioning a "enabling environment" where women's equality can be pursued effectively and institutionalized. Other avenues to prepare women for decision-making and involvement in the political process should be explored . Needed are more mentoring and training programs (from men as well as women) so that women will be ready to step into such roles. More women should participate in community, national, and international organizations. Education for women and girls must be broadened and enriched to further understanding of laws and rules that they must deal with in their daily lives.

**Partnership** Men's support and positive actions must be part of the campaign for the sharing of political power with women. Many men are already involved; more must be sought to broaden the base of support. What would be helpful would be to create a "**culture of partnership**", dedicated to mobilize men and women in support of achieving women's equal rights in all areas. There are natural opportunities for such a partnership when men and women are together in an issue, fraternal, social, or professional organization. Especially useful are men's and women's joint participation within organizations One commentator suggested such interchanges are needed if men are truly "**to become equal partners of women on this road to a transformed society. We could attain gender equality *de jure but not de facto* unless these values get woven into the fabric of society.**"

**Case Study** The experience of the World Veterans Federation as an international organization of men and women is particularly relevant. It took over thirty years for the WVF to focus on women's issues, even though it had women members from its beginnings in 1950. A Standing Committee on Women was created in 1984 to stimulate a partnership between men and women to support the goals of the WVF. Even without a "critical mass", women have played more and more important roles in every area of WVF activity, including leadership at the highest levels. By emphasizing the partnership of men and women within the organization on behalf of its goals, it has also fostered partnerships in their countries and with other members of the international community.

Though the WVF interest in women's issues was stimulated by concerns of its women members , it evolved to become a major supporter of the universality of human rights and mainstreamed gender issues throughout its deliberations. At its 23rd General Assembly, a WVF resolution " **Welcome(d)s the Beijing plus Five Outcome Document's *reaffirmation of the need for a partnership between men and women to reach a common goal of gender equality…*** " Also, as an example of its broad commitment to equal rights, in another resolution, the WVF hailed the establishment of the International Criminal Court, which it had urged for many years, and also "**urges(d) member associations to be strong advocates for gender justice so that gender-based crimes against women are prosecuted with the same dedication as other crimes, and that no exemptions are allowed for religious or cultural reasons.**"